

# Expanding Vocabulary Through Reading

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*By Fukuji Maruyama*

One day when my son Kay was about fifteen years old, I heard him talking to his mother and noticed him using big, abstract words. I wondered when and how he had acquired a vocabulary larger than the typical fifteen year old. Then I realized that at the age of fourteen, Kay had begun to borrow books from my study. He even took out *Introduction to Philosophy* by Takeo Iwasaki. He said he understood it, though his love of logic and argument sometimes annoyed his mother.

Thus, it occurred to me that my son was confirming Krashen's theory of vocabulary acquisition through reading. (see Footnote 1 below) Krashen supports the position that vocabulary is best acquired incidentally and effortlessly through reading. I have living proof of this hypothesis in my son. Furthermore, a questionnaire I distributed to twenty-two senior high school English and Japanese teachers revealed that 95.5% of them agree with the above hypothesis. (See pp. 37.)

Krashen suggests that even "light reading" can contribute to language acquisition—a proposition I had thought most high school teachers in Japan would disagree with. But contrary to my expectation, out of 22 teachers, 41% answered that even reading comic books would help, while only 27% thought they would not, and 32% had no opinion.

I agree with Krashen that high school students should be encouraged to read lighter things faster and in greater quantity, but in practice teachers go painfully slowly over materials that are too difficult. Their defense is that if they did not familiarize the students with difficult passages, the students would panic when confronted with actual entrance examinations, some of which are ridiculously difficult. As a result, students cannot understand some classroom reading materials unless teachers "kindly" translate each sentence, explaining the structure by grammatical dissection, and giving many derivatives for every new word. Teachers just translate, students only listen. It is not at all unusual that of forty students in one class, more than thirty never speak or read an English sentence even once during a fifty-minute class. This is a lecture in puzzle-solving strategies rather than a language class.

I hate to admit it, but I was one of those teachers who thought this way. I am now determined to improve my teaching by reducing translation to a minimum and increasing student-centered activities such as reading aloud, listening comprehension, dictation, and discussion in pairs or small groups.

Krashen further asserts that massive quantities of pleasure reading in the students' own area of interest may be the best way to prepare foreign language students for the serious study of literature. I still remember the excitement I experienced when, at the age of eighteen, I read "Liza of Lambeth," the first work of Somerset Maugham. I did not even hear my mother call me to come downstairs for dinner; I was not even aware I was hungry. "Low risk" reading in which I was not held responsible for content, in which I could skip words without fear of missing anything that would affect my grade, resulted in vocabulary growth and overall language competence that would later make reading great literature much easier.

I had always wanted my students to experience the same pleasure from reading, so, I invited my students to take part in a "Reading Marathon." As the material for the "race," I chose Bob Greene's *Be True to Your School*, which is a diary he kept as a high school student in 1964. On New Year's Day, 1993, the "runners" were to start reading Greene's diary of New Year's Day, 1964. They would finish the marathon on December 31, 1993 completing his entry of December 31, 1964. In short, the assignment was a synchronized reading of a diary, so to speak. More than ten out of the initial 120 "runners" ran the whole distance, while many said they had browsed parts that seemed interesting. One of them confessed that he picked up and read racy scenes exclusively. Anyway, all of them agreed that it was much more interesting than an authorized textbook in the official curriculum.

So far, most of Krashen's suggestions seem quite reasonable. Vocabulary through reading and the use of pleasure-reading can be readily accepted. But what seems likely to arouse much controversy is his suggestion that vocabulary neither be taught nor tested. Personally I am not against directly teaching vocabulary. If I explain, for example, how the word *apron* was first coined from *napron* as well as pronouncing the word repeatedly, it will have a stronger impression on my students than if they only come across the word in their reading. I understand, however, that Krashen warns against substituting drills for pleasure reading. As he puts it, exercises and drills give our students a false idea of what literacy and language acquisition are all about.

For the same reason, Krashen argues against testing vocabulary. He suspects that if we test vocabulary directly, students will study vocabulary lists and teachers will be tempted to give vocabulary exercises. According to the survey I made, eleven teachers agreed with this argument, while only three disagreed. These results show that quite a few teachers in Japan (or at least in my school) support in theory pleasure-reading. I am afraid that schools in Japan won't readily stop testing vocabulary, which, in a sense, is the acknowledged *raison d'etre* of some courses. But we can at least keep in mind Krashen's warning that testing vocabulary has the effect of hurting vocabulary development, since it pushes teachers and students in the wrong direction.

Meanwhile, lately my son Kay takes longer and longer to get to the table, and there seem to be more and more blank spaces in my bookshelves.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

SUBJECTS: 22 senior high school teachers.

AVERAGE AGE: 40.7 years old.

Q1. What percentage of your whole vocabulary have you acquired by reading?

59.5 %

Q2. What percentage of your present writing style can be attributed to your whole reading experience? 64.3 %

Q3. Do you agree with the hypothesis that vocabulary is best acquired (incidentally and effortlessly) through reading? Yes-95.5 %

(For those who said no.) What do you think the most important factor is in vocabulary growth?  
Television

Q4. How do you feel about teaching vocabulary in class?

POSITIVE NEUTRAL NEGATIVE

45.5 % 50% 4.5%

Q5. How do you feel about testing vocabulary?

POSITIVE NEUTRAL NEGATIVE

40.9% 45.5% 13.6%

Q6. Do you think that comic books help enlarge one's vocabulary?

NO NO OPINION YES

27.2% 31.8% 41.0%

Q7. Krashen claims that a brief, sustained, silent reading period is more effective for vocabulary growth than intensive vocabulary instruction. Do you agree with him ?

NO NO OPINION YES

45.5% 22.7% 31.8%

Q8. Krashen suspects that exercises and drills give our students a false idea of what literacy and language acquisition are all about. He believes that testing vocabulary has the effect of hurting vocabulary development. Do you agree with him?

NO NO OPINION YES

13.6 % 36.4 % 50.0 %

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## Footnote 1

Krashen, S.W. We acquire vocabulary by reading: *Teaching our students in a proficiency-based classroom*. Schenectady, New York: New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers. 1986.